Some of the most powerful lessons I've learned about mental health didn't come from a classroom. They showed up in quiet moments while cooking in my family's kitchen, while riding hospital shuttles alone, and in dusty stalls while caring for rescued horses.

When I was nine, my parents divorced and my father left. My mom, younger brother, and I had to rebuild a new kind of normal. We didn't talk about it much, we just kept going the best way we could. One of those ways involved my mom cooking big trays of mac and cheese. Steaming, simple, and familiar. We'd load them into the back of our old car and drive downtown, handing out paper bowls to people experiencing homelessness. The bowls weren't fancy, but they offered something real: warmth, comfort, and a reminder that someone was thinking of you.

At the time, I didn't fully understand what we were doing. I just knew we were offering something: comfort, connection, and care. Every bowl came with a story. Some were full of grief, others filled with hope. But each one reminded me that emotional struggles don't always show on the surface and that simple moments of connection can make a difference.

Then came my brother's diagnosis: a rare leukemia that brought years of chemotherapy, hospital stays, and isolation. Because of the infection risk, only my mom could be near him. I spent a lot of time alone. There was no blueprint for how to be a big sister in that situation. But in loneliness, I learned how to care for myself and for others. I cooked meals, rode hospital shuttles, and volunteered at the Ronald McDonald House where we stayed, offering help in small ways that reminded others they weren't alone.

On weekends, I spent time at a ranch caring for rescued horses. One horse, Shiloh, had a note on her stable: "Shiloh will do anything you ask, even if she is afraid or in emotional discomfort." I never forgot that.

I knew what it meant to show up scared, to keep going quietly, even without knowing how long the hard parts would last. That's when I began to see mental health not as a destination, but as a process rooted in endurance, care, and community.

One of the most beautiful moments during my brother's treatment was his Make-A-Wish trip. He asked for a food tour of Los Angeles because, if he survived, he wanted to become a chef. One night, we shared a plate of crispy chicharrón at a restaurant curated just for him. I kissed his bald head. In that moment, we weren't thinking about radiation or the six weeks he hadn't eaten solid food. We were just siblings laughing, eating, alive. I learned then that joy can live alongside pain, and healing often hides in the quiet between storms.

In high school, the pandemic hit. Academic pressure and isolation took a toll. I needed something to anchor me, so I started baking. I once made a blood orange pound cake—bright, citrusy, and just the right amount of sweet. That cake was my first real commitment to caring for myself. Baking became a form of self-care before I even had the language for it.

My experiences made me view mental health differently and see people as layered stories waiting to be understood. They shaped the kind of care I want to give others.

There’s a difference between surviving and healing. I learned this slowly. Sometimes healing doesn’t look like moving on; it looks like standing still, sitting with fear, and learning not to run from it. That’s something I want others to understand too, that growth is often uncomfortable but necessary. Facing fear taught me that courage isn’t about feeling brave, it's about choosing to act even when you’re terrified.

My experiences helping care for my family showed me that resilience is something you build little by little every day. Even small acts, like cooking meals or offering a quiet presence, matter. I also learned that cultural stigmas around mental health can isolate families when they most need support. I want to use what I’ve learned to create spaces where healing feels accessible, familiar, and safe, because everyone deserves the chance to be seen, heard, and helped.

Now, I work at an outpatient mental health clinic. I help organize records, sit in on conversations between therapists, and learn from the people around me. I take note of the kind of psychologist I hope to become—someone who understands that people aren’t problems to fix, but stories to respect.

My dream is to earn a Doctor of Psychology (PsyD) and open a community-based mental health practice that offers affordable, culturally informed care. I want to work in places where therapy isn’t always accessible or welcomed, especially in communities like the ones I come from.

For the past two years I’ve been curious about how mental health is understood globally. I’ve spent that time learning Korean language and studying Korean culture. With encouragement from my mom, I applied—and was accepted—to study abroad in South Korea this fall. A different perspective will help me build services that actually reflect the people they’re meant to support. What I learn there, I’ll bring home.

I’m also paying attention to how tools like AI are changing the field of psychology. While new technology can improve access, I believe care should still feel personal. I want to help build systems that use innovation without losing empathy. My education is helping me think critically about how to balance new tools with the human connection people still need the most.

Healing isn’t just about treatment plans or diagnoses. It’s about trust, safety, and feeling understood. That’s the kind of space I want to create. A space where people can feel seen, heard, and start to heal.

This journey isn’t just about earning a degree. It’s about building a life in service of others.

And in many ways, it all started with a bowl of mac and cheese.